

The Present State of Sikh Studies

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Christian Institute of Sikh Studies

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FORWARD

The Christian Institute of Sikh Studies was founded in 1966 with four aims in view: 1) to engage in study and research in the field of Sikh history, religion and culture; 2) to encourage interest in the study of Sikhism and the Sikhs by the Christian Church and to impart an understanding of Sikhism, both historical and contemporary, to the members of the Church; 3) to stimulate and maintain dialogue and communication between Christians and Sikhs; and 4) to produce and distribute relevant literature. This booklet, *The Present State of Sikh Studies* by Dr. J.S. Grewal, is the institute's first publication. Given its subject, it marks a most appropriate beginning to furthering all the aims for which the institute was founded.

This essay was first presented as the inaugural lecture at the formal opening of the Institute library and seminar room on August 4, 1972. It has since been revised and a list of selected readings has been added by the author. The work is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of all the works written on Sikhism or the Sikhs; rather it is an attempt to orient the non-specialist reader to the field by directing his attention to the major works and to the major issues which have dominated the field over the past one hundred years. It also indicates some lines on which further studies should advance.

Dr. J.S. Grewal is Head of the History Department and Dean of Academic Affairs at Guru Nanak University in Amritsar. He is a specialist in the fields of medieval

Indian history and Sikh history, the author of a very significant work on Guru Nanak entitled *Guru Nanak in History*, co-author of a biography of Guru Gobind Singh, and the author of numerous articles on the history of the Sikhs which have recently been republished in a single volume, *From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. Dr. Grewal therefore knows the field well. The discerning reader may note in this essay a heavy emphasis upon the historical rather than the theological aspects of Sikhism, something which seems to be due as much to a preference among scholars for describing Sikhism historically rather than theologically as to Dr. Grewal's own professional preference for history !

On behalf of the Christian Institute of Sikh Studies I wish to thank Dr. Grewal for preparing this essay for us and to commend it to our readers.

John C.B. Webster
Acting Director

MR. PRESIDENT, Ladies and Gentlemen :

I have been asked to speak on the state of Sikh studies at the formal inauguration of the Christian Institute of Sikh Studies. Whatever my own competence, I have no doubt that the best way to plan for the future is to begin with a close look at the past. Even if I fail to perform this task satisfactorily, I am grateful to the members of this institute for having given me an opportunity to reflect upon a subject which has engaged my interest for a number of years.

I have chosen to speak on the state of Sikh studies within certain limitations. In the first place, I am going to consider only the works published in English—not because no contribution has been made to Sikh studies in languages other than English, but only because my own familiarity with English works is the widest. However, it is also very probable that the bulk of serious studies so far has come out in English. Secondly, though it is possible to talk at length about each and every work published in the past, I shall be speaking about the broad development of Sikh Studies in the past century and a half, a development which can be outlined with reference to the work of some individual writers. Thirdly, I shall be able to indicate the lines on which Sikh studies may be developed in the future only on the basis of my limited understanding of the subject.

Of crucial significance in the context of the development of Sikh studies is the work of Joseph Davey Cunningham. He published his *History of the Sikhs* in 1849. It has been reprinted several times subsequently and even to day it is treated with respect by the students of Sikh history. In a way, his work was the culmination of British interest in the Sikhs. Late in the eighteenth century some travellers, diplomats, administrators and

scholars had written about the Sikhs, their history and their religion. This interest was inspired by the belief that the Sikhs were politically important in the north-western parts of the subcontinent and it was therefore useful to have information about them; their past was meant to elucidate their present for sound political action in the near or distant future. This practical interest was supported and supplemented by the intellectual curiosity of the few who were interested in universal history or the history of religion. John Malcolm, as the author of *A Sketch of the Sikhs* in the first decade of the nineteenth century, saw no incompatibility in these two kinds of interests. In his view, to know about the Sikhs was necessary for practical purposes and in order to really know the Sikhs it was necessary to know their history, religion, manners and customs. Those who wrote after Malcolm and before Cunningham were more frankly interested in Sikh politics and, therefore, in the then recent political history of the Sikhs. After the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, political interest in his kingdom excluded every other interest; a large variety of information was obtained from several sources and published. After the first Anglo-Sikh War, those who wrote on the Sikhs revelled in dwelling upon the war and its events; also, almost invariably they gloated over the success of British arms, blamed the Sikhs for bringing about the war, and justified the official policy of the British rulers of India. This immediate background, as much as the larger background of nearly three-quarters of a century, enables us to understand the significance of Cunningham's work.

Cunningham had read all that his predecessors had written; he had consulted almost every source of Sikh history by then published. He wrote his work on the eve of the extinction of the kingdom of Lahore. He combined the practical and intellectual interests of his

predecessors and his contemporaries. It should not come to us as a surprise, therefore, that his *History* became the epitome of British interest in the Sikhs. Once the Punjab was annexed to the British Empire, the nature of British interest in the Sikhs underwent a sudden change. No British writer on the Sikhs has ever seriously attempted to replace the work of J. D. Cunningham.

This is not to say, however, that Cunningham's work survived merely because of negative reasons, or merely because he summarized existing knowledge about the Sikhs. He had thought deeply about the subject of his study and he was essentially in sympathy with it. He was the first among the British historians to postulate that Sikhism was a distinct faith, meant to transcend both Hinduism and Islam; he was the first to see a close connection between the essential teachings of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh; and he was the only British historian to look upon Sikh polity as closely linked with the Sikh faith. He thought of the Sikhs as being a distinct nation. Unlike most writers of his time, Cunningham disfavoured the idea of annexing the Sikh kingdom to the British Empire. In his view, the Sikhs as a nation had the right to be independent. These, and many other ideas of his, have found favour with Indian writers and he has left a deep mark on subsequent studies. ✓

In the present century, the bulk of the work published on Sikh history has been produced by Indian writers. The advance of western education and the rise of 'nationalism' made possible and undertowed this interest. It was no accident, therefore, that two of the earliest contributors to Sikh studies were Bengalis: N. K. Sinha and Indubhushan Banerjee. They complement each other and, together, they cover Cunningham's ground. In fact, one of Sinha's books is dedicated to Cunningham.

Whereas Banerjee was interested in the socio-religious history of the Sikhs and covered the period of Guru Nanak and his nine successors in the *Evolution of the Khalsa*, Sinha was interested in the political history of the Sikhs and wrote on the rise of the Sikh power in the eighteenth century and on Ranjit Singh.

With better sources at their command, Sinha and Banerjee amplified and supported, with a few exceptions, the theses propounded by Cunningham. Banerjee's interpretation of Guru Nanak's mission is different from Cunningham's; he does not regard Guru Nanak as the founder of a distinct faith and he does not believe that Guru Nanak's message had far-reaching social implications. On most other points, however, he agrees with Cunningham. In the *Evolution of the Khalsa*, the contribution of the first four successors of Guru Nanak to the development of the Sikh Panth is discussed in detail to underline the conclusion that the Sikhs had come to form a distinct socio-religious group with its distinctive ideals and institutions; they had come to form a state within the Mughal Empire. Banerjee does not see any essential departure from the early evolutionary process in the so-called "new deal" of Guru Hargobind, who foreshadowed Guru Gobind Singh. Banerjee underlines the essentially religious interests of the latter and places his wars and the institutions of the Khalsa in that perspective. He emphasizes the importance of the Jat element in the composition of the Sikh Panth and tries to relate some of the measures of the Sikh Gurus to this fact. Cunningham had been the first to recognize the relevance of the Jat peasantry to the history of the Sikh Panth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The broad similarity between Sinha's work and Cunningham's is equally marked. Sinha looks upon the measures of Guru Gobind Singh as relevant to the rise

of the Sikhs to power; he sees a close connection also between the political institutions of the Sikhs and their faith; he accepts Cunningham's conception of Sikh polity as 'theocratic confederate feudalism'; and he looks upon Ranjit Singh as by far the most important Sikh ruler—a man who could be regarded as one of the heroes of Indian history. Also, Ranjit Singh, in Sinha's view, is important in his own right and not because of his relations with the British.

Cunningham's interpretation of Sikhism (for him the counterpart of Christianity in the Judaic tradition) was not acceptable to many a British administrator whose assumptions about the role of Christianity in India were shared by Christian missionaries. In the late nineteenth century, while the Indian subcontinent had come under British rule, a general wave of aggressive optimism prevailed among the professed protagonists of evangelical work in India. They all tended to see very little of value in other religions. Sikhism was no exception, as the work of Ernest Trump clearly showed. He was encouraged to translate the *Adi Granth* on the assumption that in order to know the religion of the Sikhs it was necessary to know their scriptures and also that, in order to persuade the Sikhs to accept Christianity, it was necessary to know what the Sikhs thought of their own religion. Trump gave an introduction to his translations from the *Adi Granth* in which his comments on the character of the Sikh scriptures and the nature of Sikh theology reveal his contempt for both. An English translation of the *Adi Granth* in the late nineteenth century was meant to be a major advance in Sikh studies, for nothing on this scale had been done before. But Trump's unconcealed hostility towards the Sikhs and their religion made his work (in contrast to Cunningham's) unpopular with educated Sikhs. It may not be too much to say that the most fruitful result of Trump's work was the reaction it

evoked after its publication in the late 1870s.

Max Arthur Macauliffe's six volumes, entitled *The Sikh Religion*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1909, were meant to replace the *Adi Granth* of Ernest Trump. They cover almost the same ground, but with a palpable difference. Whereas Trump had written with a total disregard for Sikh susceptibilities, Macauliffe wrote on behalf of the Sikhs. His translations from the *Adi Granth* are closer to the Sikh interpretation of their scriptures. This part of his work has been more acceptable to the students of Sikhism in general than Trump's; also, it has been very generally regarded as more authentic. However, in his anxiety not to offend the sentiments of his Sikh contemporaries, Macauliffe deliberately adhered to Sikh traditions regarding the lives both of the Sikh Gurus and of those saints whose compositions have been included in the *Adi Granth*. When it came to a choice between the hypercritical attitude of Trump and the uncritical attitude of Macauliffe, most scholars have chosen the latter. A student of Sikhism who does not have a working knowledge of Gurmukhi has to lean on Macauliffe even today, though other English translations of the *Adi Granth* have appeared more recently.

Foreign scholars and missionaries after Macauliffe have continued to take interest in Sikh studies. J. C. Archer's *The Sikhs* is an example of this. Similarly, Dr. C. H. Loehlin has devoted a number of years to the study of the writings of Guru Gobind Singh. (Incidentally Dr. Loehlin was connected with the Baring Christian College and the Christian Institute of Sikh Studies.) The recent work of Dr. W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, demonstrates the usefulness of a re-examination and reinterpretation of sources and themes covered by earlier writers. It casts serious doubt on the value of the *Janam-sakhi* traditions to the biographer of Guru Nanak.

The only legitimate reply to McLeod is to demonstrate the value of those traditions to the biographer of Guru Nanak. But this attempt at scholarly analysis of the most important form of evidence for the life of Guru Nanak has been occasionally criticized without rational argument. The evidence of *Janam-sakhi* traditions is extremely valuable in so far as it reflects the aspirations and attitudes of the people among whom it became current. However, if a *sakhi* is believed to contain the kernal of biographical truth, that has to be demonstrated rather than merely assumed. McLeod's re-interpretation of Guru Nanak's religion, at any rate, has been generally applauded. His is probably the best interpretation of Guru Nanak's faith to appear so far in English.

Until after independence, the scope of Sikh studies remained confined largely to the period up to the fall of the Sikh kingdom in 1849. Teja Singh, for instance, has written on the ideals and institutions of Sikhism almost entirely on the basis of its early history. In *A Short History of the Sikhs*, written conjointly with Dr. Ganda Singh, much of the eighteenth century is also covered. Dr. Ganda Singh has written on several phases and aspects of Sikhism and Sikh history. Even so, he has shown much greater interest in the period covered by Cunningham than in later Sikh history. In fact, he has made a substantial contribution to the study of two very important figures of the eighteenth century : Banda Bahadur and Ahmad Shah Durrani. Dr. H. R. Gupta has written three detailed volumes on the rise of Sikh power in the eighteenth century.

Similarly, Ranjit Singh has been a popular subject with the modern historians of the Sikhs. Dr. R. R. Sethi's *Lahore Durbar*, which aims at studying diplomatic relations between the Sikhs and the English, is a tribute to the political sagacity of Ranjit Singh. More recently,

Khushwant Singh has produced a biography of the Maharaja, while Syed Waheeduddin has brought out the essential traits of Ranjit Singh's personality in *The Real Ranjit Singh*. Dr. Fauja Singh Bajwa in his *The Military System of the Sikhs* has concentrated upon the army of Ranjit Singh just as G. L. Chopra back in the 1920's published *The Punjab as a Sovereign State*, a study of the administration of Ranjit Singh.

The decade from Ranjit Singh's death to the annexation of the Punjab, the decade of the decline and fall of Sikh power, has attracted the attention of several writers : Sita Ram Kohli, Khushwant Singh, Dr. B. R. Chopra, Dr. B. J. Hasrat, and Dr. S. S. Bal, for example. Since the publication of Cunningham's work, two major questions have agitated the minds of writers on the decline and fall of the Sikh kingdom. Did the British deliberately subvert the power of Ranjit Singh's successors ? Were the intrinsic weaknesses of the Sikh State responsible for its inevitable fall ? Almost every writer on this decade has tried, directly or indirectly, to answer these questions. While Kohli, Khushwant Singh and Dr. Chopra have written directly on the successors of Ranjit Singh, Dr. Hasrat and Dr. Bal have concentrated on the British side of the situation by studying Anglo-Sikh relations and British policy towards the Punjab.

Loss of interest in the fortunes of the Sikhs after the loss of their political power is understandable. From the very beginning the British interest in the Sikhs was a tribute to their political power. The Sikhs as subjects, however, were of little interest, except for the purposes of government and administration. The identification of history with past politics had led many writers to study the Sikhs of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. Indian scholars too have concentrated on pre-British centuries for reasons of their own. Many chose

to debate their British predecessors on the latter's grounds. Socio-religious movements of the late nineteenth and the political awakening in the early twentieth century inspired interest both in the socio-religious origins of the Sikhs and in their political development. Thus, for nearly a century after the fall of the kingdom of Lahore, the Sikhs appeared to have a more or less distant past, but no immediate past or present.

Only after the end of British rule in India have some writers thought of turning to the Sikhs of the British period. Considerable attention has been paid to the Namdharis, or Kukas, as the protagonists of a socio-religious movement with political undertones, as in the *Freedom Fighters* of M. L. Ahluwalia and the *Kuka Movement* of Dr. Fauja Singh Bajwa. More recently, N. G. Barrier has brought out a comprehensive bibliography for the period between 1849 and 1919, entitled *The Sikhs and Their Literature*. It contains a brief but meaningful introduction to the Singh Sabha Movement.

Although the history of the Sikhs during the British period is just beginning to be studied, Khushwant Singh has attempted a general history of this period in the second volume of his *History of the Sikhs*. A first rate journalist, they say, is better than a second-rate historian. But Khushwant Singh is not in competition with second-rate historians; his is the only general history of this period. It is an ambitious but premature attempt. He has the merit of being the first in the field, but even a first-rate journalist is no substitute for a good historian. A considerable amount of spade work has to be done by a large number of scholars before a good general history of the Sikhs under British rule can be written. ✓

It is obvious that the period from 1849 to 1947 presents immense possibilities to the student of Sikh

history. What happened, for instance, to the Sikh ruling class after the annexation of the Punjab? In what sense did a Sikh social order exist during the early decades of British rule? What particular strata or groups of that social order were affected by the new order of things? With what social or political implications? The rise of the Kukas, the Singh Sabha and the Akalis may be studied in this context. The Sikh writers of this period were not writing about their immediate past but about the pre-British days; it may be fruitful to examine what kind of self-image they cherished in these writings and how these writings were tied up with the problems of their day. The whole range of revenue records can be tapped to study in depth the varying fortunes of Sikh land-owners and peasants. The contribution of the Sikhs to the development of commerce and industry in the country can be usefully examined. The Sikhs and the Scots, it is said, are found in every part of the world. A study of the Sikh emigrants can be very interesting and, perhaps, revealing from a socio-economic point of view. This is not an exhaustive list of topics for research and sufficient evidence appears to exist on these and other important aspects of Sikh history during the British period to make such research possible.

This is not to say, however, that no further work is needed on the pre-British history of the Sikhs. Guru Nanak could be studied in terms of his response to the situations of his times in order to clarify our understanding of many debatable issues, as has been done recently in *Guru Nanak in History*. Re-interpretations become more meaningful when a historian has the advantage of some fresh evidence at his command. The publication of a large number of *hukmnamas* by Dr. Ganda Singh, for example, has opened up new possibilities of interpretation. Similarly, the publication of the official orders of the Sikh Chiefs of the late eighteenth century, more

than those of Ranjit Singh and his representatives, in *The Mughal and Sikh Rulers and the Vaishnavas of Pindori*, should oblige the historians of the Sikhs to revise their views on Sikh polity.

Re-interpretation of the pre-British period of Sikh history is not only possible but extremely desirable. What is even more desirable is to concentrate on those aspects of that history which have received inadequate attention from the historians thus far. To give only a few examples: the social composition of the Sikh Panth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the structure of power in the Punjab during the late eighteenth century; the agrarian system under the Sikh rulers; social change under Sikh rule.

I think I have said enough to indicate the broad development of Sikh studies during the last one century and to indicate the lines on which further work can be done without much difficulty, provided we have the will and the patience which rigorous scholarship demands. I have every hope that the members of the Christian Institute of Sikh Studies shall make a meaningful contribution to Sikh studies. My best wishes are with them.



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